

Chester Higgins

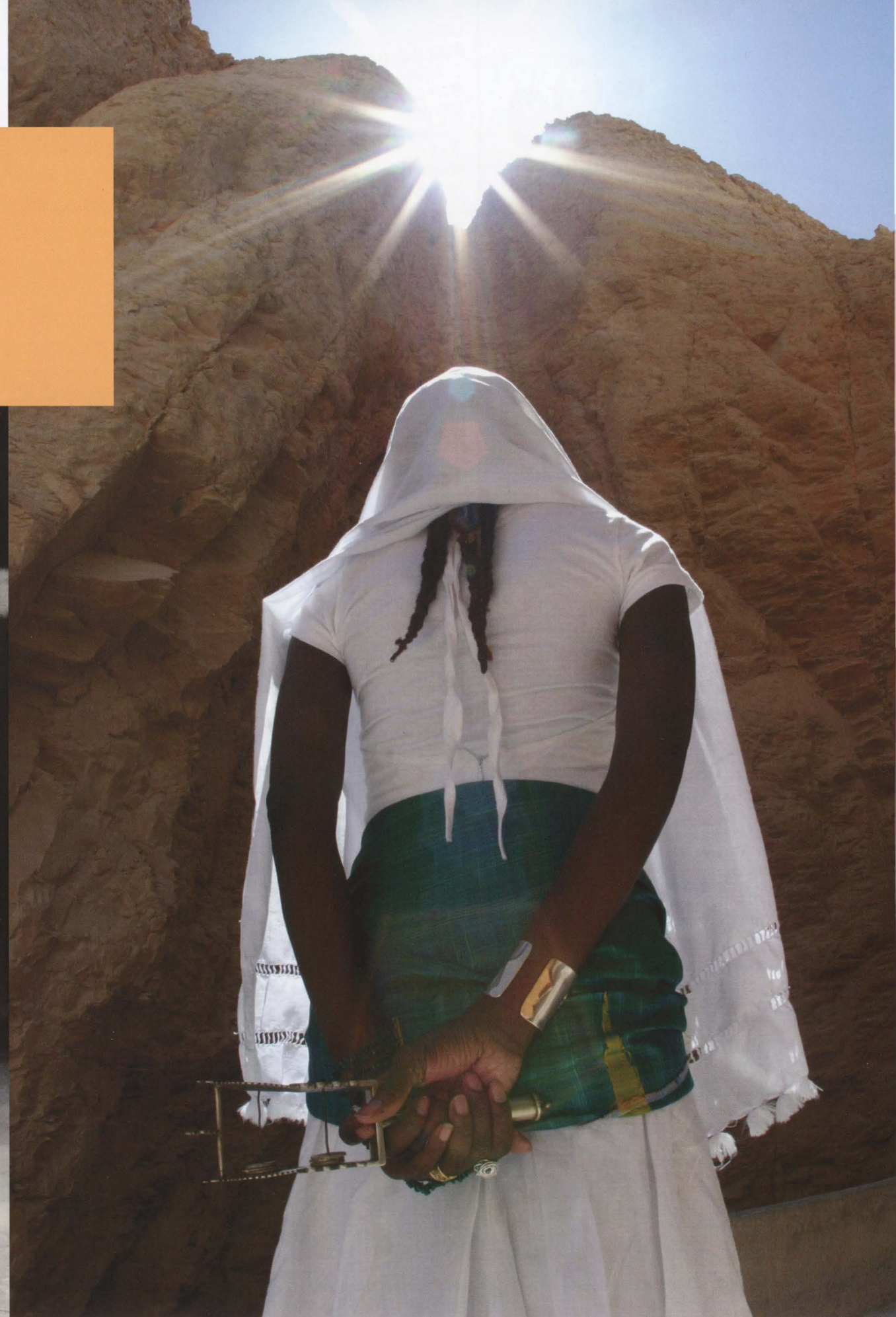
BEARING WITNESS

BY JENNY FINE

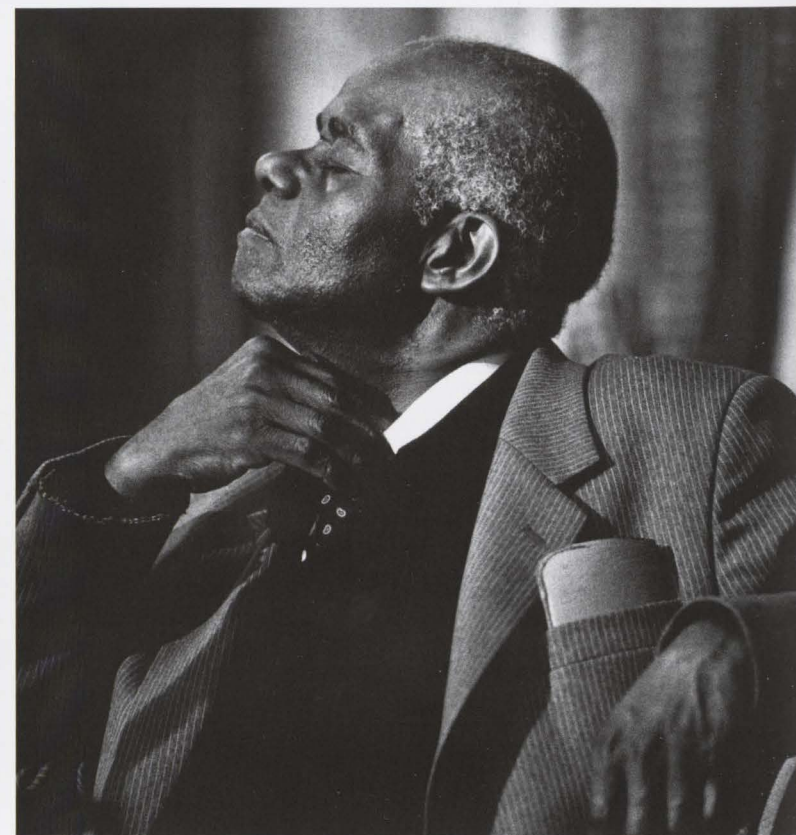
In Coffee County, Alabama, cradled in the expanses of grass and gravel that span the distance between county roads are unremarkable but familiar icons: loblolly pines, propane tanks, kudzu, shotgun houses, the makings of a town. New Brockton is a small town by any definition. Even today, its population is under 1,500. But during the mid-twentieth century in this haphazard checkerboard of asphalt, farmland, storefronts, and small homes, a talent was gestating. An anointing was coming.

At nine years old, Chester Higgins was awoken by a messenger from the Almighty. An angel, appearing in the form of a placid Black man, beckoned him from his sleep with the message, "I come for you." His family rushed into his room responding to the young boy's screams of terror. His grandfather, a Baptist preacher, explained to Chester that this jarring theophany was a divine calling. Within a year, Chester was preaching the gospel.

When Chester's grandfather, who he saw as a shining example of faith, passed away, the people entrusted with continuing the gospel message left the young man feeling dissatisfied and alienated. As is the case with many adolescents who cross the bridge into adulthood, Chester had to throw off the cast skin of inherited beliefs and the familiarity of hometown in order to set about establishing who he was.



Above, L to R: Chester at work in 1976, photo by Carl Samrock • *Sacred Women Ceremony in the Valley of the Kings*, Luxor, Egypt; images courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.



While at Tuskegee University, Chester met photographer and future mentor P.H. Polk. When viewing Polk's photos, he came across a picture of a well-dressed Black family. The photo spoke to Chester. He saw in that photograph what had been lacking in the portrayals of African Americans in the media, in his hometown of New Brockton, and in his family. He was moved to act. His deep love for his family and his community prompted Chester to pick up the camera and photograph them as he saw them. African Americans deserved pictures of themselves to hang on their walls that reminded them of who they were. They needed to see in portraits of themselves what society-at-large refused to acknowledge: qualities of decency, dignity, and virtuous character – traits he knew his people possessed in abundance.

As his college career neared its end, the nation was approaching critical mass. The late 1960s were a cauldron of social unrest and societal change in the United States. The seemingly unshakable infrastructure of segregation and disenfranchisement, generations in the making, penned rules by which society played – both on paper and in the hearts of man. Chester desired to be a member of the activist machinery that would retool society into one that was more equal for all. He worked tirelessly to do so and captured it with his camera. The antidote to any sense of powerlessness would come through the relationships he forged through his lens.

Chester embarked on exploratory work, creating portrayals of Black Americans in actions and settings that were at times full of ethereal grace, and at other times, raw with candor. This approach would carry far more weight than he could have imagined. The true protest, it would eventually become clear, would be most effectively exercised in making the simple artistic statement that everyday black life is as authentic and dignified a life as any other.

“You have to see the picture forming in order to capture the photograph.”

In 1969, Chester decided to hone his craft. He sought direction from the editors of national media publications and made it clear that it was no shrouded plea for employment – he only wanted to know how he could be a better photographer. Arthur Rothstein of *Look* magazine replied to his query. Chester, in his role as pupil, was given a roll of 35mm film and told to bring images in for critique. The alchemical arts of composition and editing were taught to Chester by his new mentor during one particularly transformative session during which Rothstein reframed one of Chester's photographs with startling effect.

In speaking with Chester about his mentors, he said, “P.H. Polk reconfirmed for me the worthiness of my people. Arthur Rothstein taught me how to see, how to exercise the eye knowingly, to envision the visual possibilities and anticipate what the image is going to be. Graphing the ceremony of human behavior will determine the composition and tell you, the photographer, where you should position yourself to capture the image.” In this way, Chester defines his practice as a photographer who *makes* images, not *takes* them. “If you see a picture, it's too late. You have to see the picture forming in order to capture the photograph.”

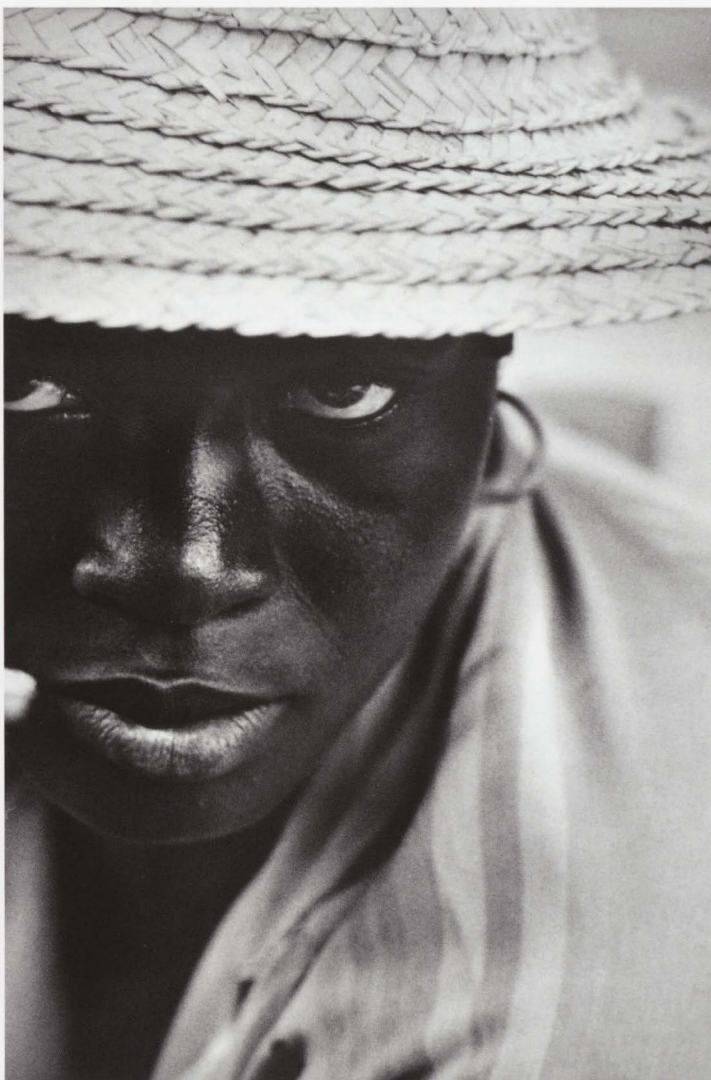
Chester prefers the conceal-and-carry approach to photography, pulling his camera from his bag only as he sees a photograph unfolding. Once the image is sufficiently captured, Chester returns his camera to his bag so as to not “interrupt the ripple of time.” The skill to refine his raw talent into a perfectly composed instrument for cultural change was in hand; he was closer than ever to responding to the

Clockwise from top: *Barbershop, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1972*, gelatin silver print by Chester Higgins, collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art • *John Henrik Clarke, 1998*, courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives • Chester Higgins and Tuskegee mentor P.H. Polk in New York, courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.

Spirit's call from many years ago. By divine design, his fate was tenderly pursuing him: among Coffee County's muted pecan groves, through Klansman-lit flames licking his grandparents' home, past the storied archives of Tuskegee, and in the atomized pixels of light in the nightly news. This mission had always been coming for him, his purpose was to elevate the truth and show the world the humanity of Black America.

Chester's growing portfolio and recognition of his tenacious, groundbreaking images made in Senegal earned him a staff photographer position at *The New York Times* in 1975. Speaking of his time and mission at the publication, Higgins said, "We are all human. We all love our children. We all have

relationships with our friends. We all have loss, joy. These things given to us are based upon our blood, not our skin. My mission at *The New York Times* was to bring an understanding that humanity is universal." Rather than portrayals of African Americans as a menace, as a danger to be feared, Chester focused his camera on decency and Black love. His purpose was to bear witness to the truth of his people, to tell of the beauty and grace of his brothers and sisters and he would do this by publishing these images in *The New York Times* – a global publication bound for the homes of their predominantly white audience. Perhaps Chester's most profound contribution is this subversive and effective approach to peaceful resistance.



Above, L to R: *Haitian Vendor*, 1991, gelatin silver print by Chester Higgins, collection of Huntsville Museum of Art • *My Great-Aunt Shugg Lampley*, New Brockton, Alabama, 1968, courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.

Clockwise from top: *Park Rhythm*, Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn, 1976 • Amiri Baraka dancing with Maya Angelou at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, 1991, Chester Higgins/*The New York Times* • Bob Marley, *Final Performance*, Madison Square Garden, New York, 1980; images courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.



Through discussions with photographer Gordon Parks, and through his own deductions, a powerful concept took hold of Chester: "A photograph never lies about the photographer." Chester's revelation between his germination as a young artist in Tuskegee and his bloom in New York and Africa was that he was the free agent in charge of his camera's lens. He had the responsibility of determining how his people would be presented.

His people – this term was one worthy of reflection at this point in his life and career. The complex and gnarled cross-section of his people's history implanted a desire within him to do away with ambiguity and allow the Spirit to cast holy light on the lives of Black Americans. A determination was made to find their beating heart, or rather, to find the electrical signal that made that heart pump with the familiar vigor he loved so deeply. So, the photographer made pilgrimage after pilgrimage back to the source: Africa. Chester pulled back the veil of lost familial heritage and revealed the boisterous joy and love for life that burned within and shone from his kinsmen in America.

Through his focused research, Chester unearthed the age-old roots of religions that have heavily impacted the world we know, buried from millennia past in savannahs, the red clay, and the riverbeds. He encountered his cousins, an entire continent of cousins, nation by nation. During his trips to Africa, Chester looked for the spark of commonality in every interaction and soon built an exchange of trust through the offer of a gift – a photograph. Using a Polaroid camera, he would introduce members of tribes to the idea of having their image taken. Through these Polaroids, Chester showed the sitter how he saw them and in turn a relationship would evolve. Upon arrival to a village, Chester was always met first by the children of the tribe who were curious and eager to have their image magically captured and appear before

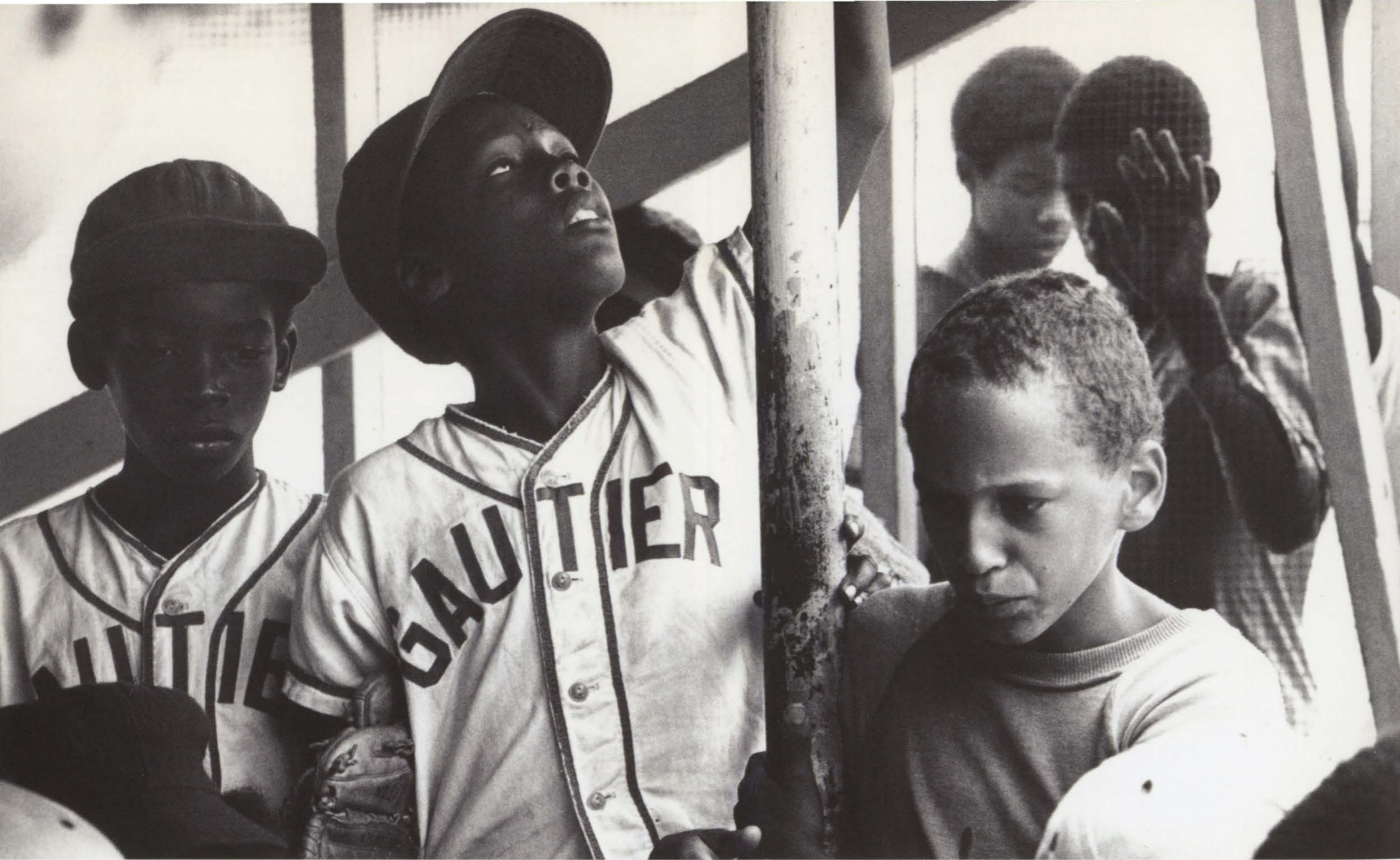
their eyes. Giving the photos to the children, they would run home to excitedly show their parents who soon sent for Chester to visit their family homes. Then, with their permission, Chester would prepare his equipment and capture the decency, dignity, and virtuous character of these African people just as he had done among his people in the United States.

In the end, the revolutionary act was one so simple yet so weighted with responsibility. The camera, the edit, and the publication were – all the time – waiting on Chester to move from New Brockton, through the university, to New York, and out into the broader world so that he could answer his divine calling. This medium hummed from his heavenly calling at age nine, and through every revelation. It was churning with an almost impatient potential energy that would – and that still does – explode the edifice of racial prejudice and evolve the national image of the African American. The subtlety and grace of the vehicle of photography as a means of accomplishing this goal suit Chester perfectly. Humble, gentle, with a powerful effectiveness that does not need to shout to accomplish the mission at hand.

The faintly raspy voice he speaks with is one of friendship, of telling difficult truths with love, and one that lacks pretense. He needs only be Chester Higgins. He needs only to carry out the craft which comes naturally to him. For Chester, photography has been a spiritual act of obedience to the charge from his angelic visitor many years ago. His photographs have been a sacrament. The divine has a reconciliatory mission. The images he has captured constitute an understated revolutionary approach to societal and spiritual healing through the reclamation of image and identity.

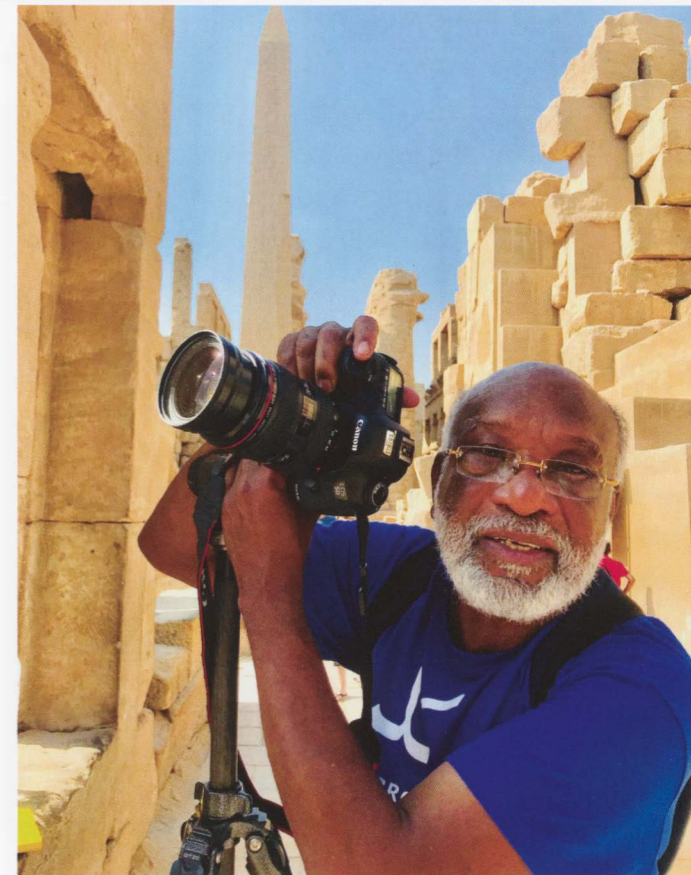
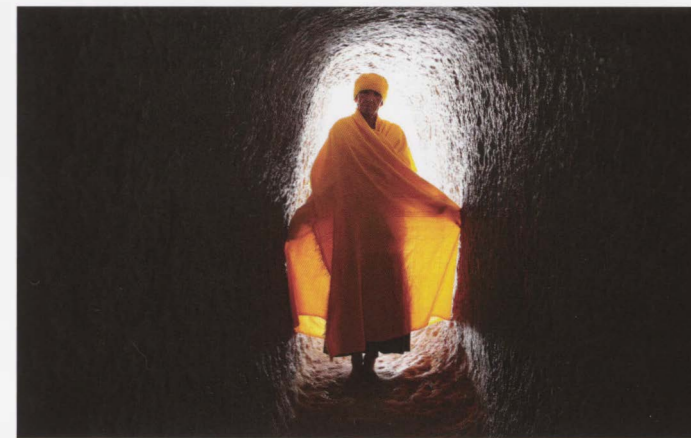
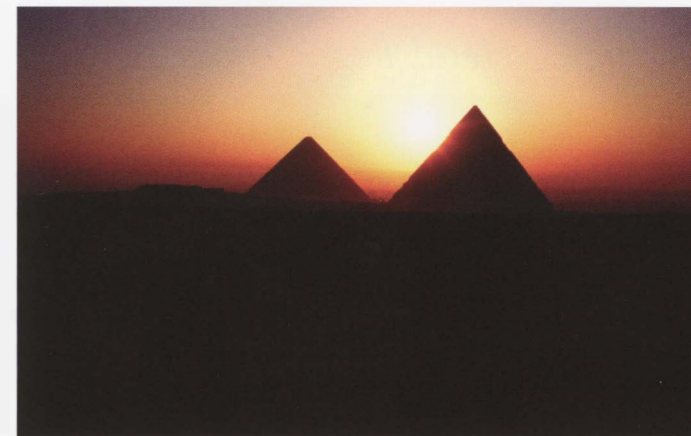
In my correspondence with Chester, he recalled, "In Ethiopia, I discovered that slavery is not the

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Aretha Franklin at the Apollo, Harlem, New York, 1971 • Okwui Okpokwasili in rehearsal for *Bronx Gothic*, 2013, Chester Higgins/*The New York Times* • portrait of George Cecil Winsor & Lettice Edwards Winsor • the hand of Doris Harper-Wills; images courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.



history of Black people but an evil interruption of our history." This statement so delicately voices the redemptive work done with his camera. It is a matter of truth-telling. Calling what is evil, evil, is a thing of necessity. But just as essential is saying to this evil, "You do not get to define who we are." The act of telling Black stories of hope, of love, and of redemption belongs to artists like Chester Higgins. The impression of Blackness has forever been changed in America because of the stories told by Chester's images. The sights, sensations, victory, and heartbreak of his brothers and sisters have spoken to individuals of all backgrounds, allowing a glimpse into a marginalized people who are worthy of communion, of love, and of respect.

Later in life, on a trip to Africa, a spiritual revelation similar to the experience of his youth occurred for Chester. This calling was dramatic, jarring even. But the message was expressed clearly to him: "I am not done with you." Chester's ministry has spanned decades. But he does not find himself behind a pulpit, Bible folded open, preaching the gospel each week. Instead, camera in hand, with every image that shines a light on the beauty of creation, he fulfills the mission he was charged with so many years ago. The splendor of his people is forever memorialized in Chester Higgins's photographs. Referring to the weight of this charge, he says he is attempting in his work and life always to "wrap a blanket of love around people marooned on this island of hate." ♦



Right: The Great Pyramid at sunset in Giza, Egypt, for National Geographic's *Unlocking the Great Pyramid* • *Lalibela Pilgrim*, 2007, featured in Chester's book *Sacred Nile* • On location at Luxor Temple, Egypt, photo by Betsy Kissam; images courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives.

Opposite page, clockwise from top: *Decisive Time Out*, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1973, courtesy of Chester Higgins/Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Tuskegee University Archives • *Couple*, Brooklyn, 1973, gelatin silver print by Chester Higgins, collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art • *Father Swings Son in Sunset*, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1973, gelatin silver print by Chester Higgins, collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art.